

Race and Myth



Race and Myth Revisited by Walter Rhett

How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the speeches of my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was - such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth. But many as their falsehoods were, there was one

Race and Myth

*of them which quite amazed me; - I mean when they told you to be upon your guard, and not to let yourselves be deceived by the force of my eloquence. They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency; they certainly did appear to be most shameless in saying this, unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for then I do indeed admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! —Socrates, **The Apology***

In a written account of a runaway from slavery, authorities stopped a suspected fellow, questioning him closely. “Where are you going?” they asked. “I am from South Carolina!” he replied. Puzzled, unsure about his answer, they let him continue on his way. His empathetic response won the day.

“I’m from South Carolina!” Do you think I am so stupid as to run away, knowing what I face if captured? Surely the masters of fear succeeded in deterring the thought of escape and made profoundly clear my lot, and I my willingness to accept it without challenge.

“I’m from South Carolina!” Need I say more than this simple moral plea, even for a bondsman? Is justice found in the demands for denigration and physical cruelty that respect no rights except wealth and power?

“I’m from South Carolina!” I know you will never admit my feat of deception, or the success of my journey so far; it casts a long shadow on your beliefs and institutions and shows how the cherished follies you substitute for truth fall woefully short, including the idea that superior intelligence and character is tied to skin color and the land of birth or heritage. I am African. Stop me--and reveal to yourselves your failure, and know you will fail again. You can not face this failure, so you will ignore

Race and Myth

my success. Let me go; you will pretend this never happened and that your fears and narcissism are intact.

"I'm from South Carolina!" You are powerless. I will not respond to your confrontation. Nor be drawn into a defensive fight. I have said enough. My truth is deaf to your demand. Let me pass.

I.

These four dialogues—different than Plato's—are multiple sides of the gnostic "[that-which-is](#)," the search for a reality based in truth, in which no simple explanation by itself gives the right reason, but they all do so collectively, as air, water and sun enjoin the storm.

The South Carolina runaway flees at the zenith of oppression by race. At a time and point when the enslaved were captured as fighters and sold like commodities. They were shipped stacked like casks of myrrh, the dead deposited like scraps; landed, then worked like beasts, bought and sold as capital on balance sheets, widely used as instruments of status and pleasure—while being sources of ridicule and disdain and proclaimed sub-human. In America, the enslaved lost the fight for any external right of freedom by government, except those granted by individual property holders.

But the experiences of slavery and the enslaved reveal something more. Race in the form of slavery was at the center of a global debate about the sacred nature of life, the authority and rule of a divine presence, about the relations of a highly visible and tempting secular life of wealth and ease to the unseen admonitions of logic and faith. Some men refused to hold the enslaved as property because it profaned a sacred trust.

Over time the discussions and views which once vigorously embraced the deep, centered questions of slavery and race moved away from the foundations of faith and in-depth human inquiry. No longer was the discussion filled with the terms of the celebrated principles of the gifted

Race and Myth

Greek philosophers and others who carefully charted the grand reviews of who we are, of life's meaning, of the nature and fundamentals of truth, and how suffering, punishment and accountability are described and distributed in secular and sacred justice.

Over time, we have forgotten race had a deeper, more profound core: it was a prism into humanity, into how we thought and felt about ourselves and others; about who we were and what we celebrated; about what values were inviolate and what principles we would defend, even how we saw the image and hand of God and stewardship and mercy and how we responded to its paradox.

Race tested the limits of governments and men to envision the reach of deceit and sin. It set limits on liberty. It changes economics: in the 1781 [case of the British slaver, the Zong](#), its insurers were ordered by a lower court to pay the costs of Africans jettisoned as cargo because the ship ran low on drinking water. The court found that even for the enslaved, the British maritime principle holds that a captain who jettisons part of his cargo in order to save the rest can claim for the loss from his insurers.

The case was so egregious that the British high court threw out the lower court's ruling to issue an insurance payout on the dead souls of a deliberately jettisoned cargo of men, women and children, a ruling which had suddenly made slavery's horrors benign and its greed for profits obscene.

In a three-day period on the Zong, 54 children and women, then 36 men, were lost, followed by another 42 thrown overboard (and these numbers may be too small). Many on the last two days were jettisoned after it rained!

Race and Myth



A replica of the Zong

Chained together, 10 enslaved jumped from the Zong in protest. These captives would not settle for the lives of slaves as a condition of the death of others. They surely would not settle today for the crumbs of riches given as welfare. Even then they would not settle, before the courts ruled, ignoring precedent, that the killing of innocents was lawful.

The Zong case revealed a shameful paradox: that men could turn other men/women/children into slaves, sell them for profit; that God and law had become separated in the souls of some. It held another lesson hidden in its horror: that truth will embody change. The old status quo passes and brings new issues forward. But the new issues of freedom after slavery turned race from reality to myth.

In an irony of American thinking, the greater the progress made against racial oppression, discrimination, bias and injustice, the more the old roots that anchored the discussion were pulled up. The buying and selling of human beings, forcibly transmitting across an ocean to an alien

Race and Myth

land, is the central issue of slavery, not the work ethic of those enslaved. But powerful outside forces shape the conditions of slaves and their descendants, and their hard work to become victors over the odds seems to garner less respect.

Race became a story robbed of its epic soul. No longer debated in the words of Christ and Socrates, or the great English, French and German philosophers, or the Grimké sisters, Frederick Douglass, or the eloquent abolitionists, including England's William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, race, no longer a pivot point, has become a wedge of hate and blame—of power and politics. Hate and blame used denial to limit and distract its discussion. Race has evolved into a debate over stereotypes, from which there is little escape, with all sides engaging in blame. Too little, too much; too lazy, too mean; too denied, too rigged; too late, too entitled.

We have forgotten the inclusiveness with which Frederick Douglass addressed a nation from Arlington Cemetery in May 1871, when he asked, "What Shall Men Remember?"

"If we ought to forget a war which has filled our land with widows and orphans, which has made stumps of men of the very flower of our youth, and sent them on the journey of life armless, legless, maimed and mutilated; which has piled up a debt heavier than a mountain of gold—swept uncounted thousands of men into bloody graves—and planted agony at a million hearthstones; I say that, if this war is to be forgotten, I ask, in the name of all things sacred, what shall men remember?

II.

A country has forgotten and altered its meaning. The profound has been replaced by the stupid. Instead of Monroe Trotter, Henry Highland Garnet and W.E.B. DuBois' gifted insights, we get Michele Bachmann's mangled facts and Newt Gingrich's Mau Mau spree. Instead of lynchings,

Race and Myth

we get leeches; even as the lynching of young men continue by gunshot rather than rope. Instead of a common humanity, we get officials who said their idea of God led them to refuse to marry those in love with members of different races. Instead of respect, we get soldiers refusing service under a legally installed black Commander-in-Chief as a matter of "conscience."

We get a party that ignores its historic Southern strategy, directly tied to exploiting race; only to remind us that white Democrats were once racists—and the same group to which its Southern strategy appealed!

We get a news media that says the right to private conversations under free speech inoculates someone with racist views from consequences; ignoring that a doctor using drugs privately is at professional risk; a person sleeping with your spouse can be sued; a baseball player, track runner, cyclist, or weight lifter privately using drugs can be barred from competition. Donald Sterling needs to know words are acts. Words do not belong in a separate category when it comes to consequences, especially in the marketplace and under a signed agreement of authority that spells out consequences for acts of speech.

The days when property holders who claimed the ownership of people and occupied high office are gone, because law—words—created a new reality. It is perfectly permitted within the culture, when mayors, city council members, and the President call a racist myth reprehensible to take action—no society has to endorse its sin to preserve its freedom. And four hundred years of evidence and witness that includes four years of a war that produced the largest number of American war dead of any conflict, is not a rush to judgement about liberty and rights.

Yet we are seeing the profound realities of slavery and its powerful restrictions on movement, choices and identity, its deep questions of inner truth, devolve into the idea that slavery was a barter system which offered gifts of food, shelter and character in return for labor and largesse.

None of the thousands of letters by property holders detailing relations with the enslaved suggest this. None of the millions of first

Race and Myth

person documents ignore the intelligence and gifts of integrity the enslaved brought to the system. None of the individual states' Articles of Secession from the Union reduce slavery to barter, even as they claim benefit. And the beneficiaries are clear: those in power, white men.

Here's [what Texas said](#):

“She was received as a commonwealth holding, maintaining and protecting the institution known as negro slavery—the servitude of the African to the white race within her limits—a relation that had existed from the first settlement of her wilderness by the white race, and which her people intended should exist in all future time. Her institutions and geographical position established the strongest ties between her and other slave-holding States of the confederacy.

That in this free government all white men are and of right ought to be entitled to equal civil and political rights; that the servitude of the African race, as existing in these States, is mutually beneficial to both bond and free, and is abundantly authorized and justified by the experience of mankind, and the revealed will of the Almighty Creator, as recognized by all Christian nations; while the destruction of the existing relations between the two races, as advocated by our sectional enemies, would bring inevitable calamities upon both and desolation upon the fifteen slave-holding States.”

And South Carolina:

“The right of property in slaves was recognized by giving to free persons distinct political rights, by giving them the right to represent, and burdening them with direct taxes for three-fifths of their slaves; by

Race and Myth

authorizing the importation of slaves for twenty years; and by stipulating for the rendition of fugitives from labor.

We affirm that these ends for which this Government was instituted have been defeated, and the Government itself has been made destructive of them by the action of the non-slaveholding States. Those States have assume the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to seize the property of the citizens of other States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection.”

These proclamations ignore the material and psychological cruelties and restrictions of slavery and overlook the more meaningful dialogues of their times—including the terse exchange between the black runaway and the free whites who initiate his stop. They argue from tradition, from race, from the Constitution—from God. So recent narratives throw even more dirt to cover up the deeper meanings woven into race, even as they expose still-evident, popular myths.

Race and Myth

III.

Henry Highland Garnet, the pastor of 15th Street Presbyterian Church before Francis Grimké, used powerful language in preaching his messages of freedom. From his sermon, "Let The Monster Perish":

"They were learned in the law of Moses and in the traditions of their fathers, but the principles of righteousness failed to affect their hearts. They knew their duty but did it not. The demands which they made upon others proved that they themselves knew what things men ought to do. . . They demanded that others should be just, merciful, pure, peaceable and righteous. But they were unjust, impure, unmerciful—they hated and wronged a portion of their fellowmen, and waged a continual war against the government of God.

We have modern Scribes and Pharisees, who are faithful to their prototypes of ancient times.

They are intelligent and well-informed, and can never say, either before an earthly tribunal or at the bar of God, "We knew not of ourselves what was right." They are acquainted with the principles of the law of nations. They are proficient in the knowledge of Constitutional law.

But others, their fellow men, equal before the Almighty and made by Him of the same blood, and glowing with immortality, they doom to lifelong servitude and chains. Yes, they stand in the most sacred places on earth, and beneath the gaze of the piercing eye of Jehovah, the universal Father of all men, and declare that 'the best possible condition of the Negro is slavery.'"

Race and Myth

In the 19th century, slavery was at the center of insights about oppression. South Carolina's Grimké sisters, Sarah and Angelina:

"were among the first to explicitly connect race oppression to women's oppression. Sarah "thanked" John Quincy Adams in her Letters on Equality for placing women "side by side with the slave" "ranking us with the oppressed." Using a Kantian ethical argument that opposes using humans as means rather than as ends in themselves, she noted that historically "woman has ... been made a means to promote the welfare of man" (Ceplair 209). She tied the subordination of slaves and women to educational deprivation, noting that both women and slaves been deemed mentally inferior "while being denied the privileges of liberal education" (Lerner 1998a, 122-3)."

Their nephew, Francis Henry Grimké, the minister after Henry Highland Garnet at Washington's African-American 15th Street Presbyterian Church, frequently said, "Race prejudice must be lived down, not talked down." He added, "It is what is written on the soul of man that will stand the wreck of time."

The unnamed runaway lived and talked it down, with a commitment from the depths of his soul. The point is the runaway's life was at risk when he confronted authorities, suspicious of his intent and presence. His answer was a powerful stroke for freedom. It changed the direction of the spear. It challenged and destroyed a vacuous myth.

I'm from South Carolina. And the reality of race should not be replaced again by myth. Its reality should inspire the continued recovery of our deepest, profoundest truths, and the revelation of our unity and ties to each other through the shared riches of our creative gifts.